DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 000 CS 205 961

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TITLE The Assessment of Oral English.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Conference on the Teaching of English (3rd, Sydney, Australia, August 17-22, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); Foreign Countries; *Graduation Requirements; *Language Tests; *Oral English; Oral Reading; Secondary Education; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and discusses the school leaving examination in oral English in South Africa, which is designed for those whose first language is English and involves the presentation of a prepared talk, reading aloud, and a conversation with a teacher. Each element of the test is discussed and evaluated separately. Problems of reticence in adolescent boys, lack of continuous oral language assessment, lack of training in speech instruction by the teachers and the time-consuming aspects of the test are also discussed. (MKM)

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THE ASSESSMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH

(Prepared for the Third International Conference on the teaching of English, 'English in the Eighties', held at the University of Sydney, August 17-22 1980)

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Almost everyone who can understand and speak English has some experience and expertise in assessing speech. Since days of yore, students have been judging their teachers' delivery of lessons; husbands, in answering their wives' claims that they have not been listening, have argued that their partners have not spoken clearly or interestingly enough; voters have opted for candidates with the 'gift of the gab'.

As we all know, education in many countries is currently placing renewed emphasis on spoken language. As we also know, education systems seem to accord informal prestige only to those areas which are examined or tested. Herein lies the first and major problem: for because speech is so personal a part of our lives, assessment of it (perhaps more than in any other area even of English) implies assessment of oneself as a person. Research into interviews, viva examinations and even beauty contests indicates fairly clearly that the assessment of people is a hazardous business.

The electronic media, the greater mingling of social classes, and attempts to apply some of the principles of participatory democracy in classrooms, are some of the factors which have laid increased stress on the importance of speech in education. In the teaching and testing of second languages, of course, the methods have always tended to favour oral work; regarding a pupil's first language, there has been the casual assumption that because all normal human beings can speak, there has been no specific need to provide for tuition.

In my country, over the past five years, the assessment of oral English has been formally provided for in the school-leaving examination (at end of Year 12) for White pupils and, more recently, for Indian pupils. Of our 25 million people, about 4½ million are white; of these, 37% speak English as a first language. You will at least concede me the distinction of being a member of a minority group: Because we have two official languages and about twelve others, eight education departments and at least as many secondary school syllabuses, you will probably be relieved to hear that my comments, when they refer to South Africa, are directed to only one group!

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Most teachers nowadays would accept that assessment (leading to possible reconsideration of purpose and method, as well as judgment of a candidate) is necessarily a built-in part of education, and should be linked with

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objectives. The technology of education has shown us the wisdom of clearly formulated objectives; but it has also tended to perpetrate a view of the teacher as a super-technicist, bent on developing a product: fluent compositions, well-prepared speeches. In oral work, and particularly in assessing oral English, it is the interpersonal relations which exist between teacher and pupil that are most important; the process is infinitely more important than the product, and assessment is far more than correction.

Greater stress on this idea of the process, rather than of the product, would surely lead us to realise that subjectivity in assessment is not some ogre to be slain; indeed, rather than a problem capable of solution, subjectivity is a situation with which we must come to terms. Years ago Jackson, on behalf of teachers of English, noted that

> 'Examinations are the terrain of the measurable, and our prime concern is with the play of the sensitivity. Nothing could be more delicate, perishable, enmeshed in the fine movements of growth.' (1965, p.11).

It seems high time indeed that we should stop apologising for being subjective in the assessment of oral English. As Andrew Wilkinson has pointed out, there is less agreement among teachers on 'standards' in speech than there is agreement on standards of writing. Nevertheless, there are generally accepted criteria of success, basically reflective of an answer to the question, 'What is spoken English?'

In answer to the question, Christabel Burniston notes that spoken English involves:

> clear and purposeful thinking;
> a vocabulary to make clear expression possible;
> a flexible range of vocal tone;
> an awareness and feeling for the significant rhythm of speech, with suitable use of stress;
> clarity and precision without affectation;
> pronunciation which causes neither embarrassment nor ambiguity;
> and the ability to hold the attention of a listening group.

Though perhaps fairly obvious, these features would seem to give the key to any meaningful programme of assessment of oral work in English.

In my country, assessment involves presentation of a prepared talk; reading aloud; and conversation with a teacher. The assessments are considerably time consuming: at least fifteen minutes per pupil, and this normally during school lesson time. The time used in allocating marks is obviously considerable, and may actually prevent other (perhaps more valuable) oral work from taking place. The stress falls on a test situation, rather than on participation in an enjoyable and productive activity. Of course, some teachers do complete the assessments out of school time, or devise ways in which all members of a class may be actively involved all the time, but this is not the norm.

A recent move to involve audience participation in the prepared talks, and to include as part of the assessment, the handling of questions from peers, is likely to place greater stress on the process than on the product, but this has yet to take root. The assessments of prepared talks would then be more akin to the auditions for personal projects run by the English Speaking Board, which will probably be familiar to many.

Some teachers manage to incorporate continuous assessment of oral work throughout the year, so that pupils are not always conscious of being assessed, but this requires considerable planning; many pupils experience only tests of their oracy, and often to no audience other than the teacher. In the case of conversation, this imposes specific difficulties - for becuase of the obvious age and status differences, the whole idea of genuine conversation, involving sincere expression and a reciprocal influence and dependence, is questionable when the situation involves one teacher and one pupil.

Other problems rear their heads: the published criteria for assessment are not fully defined or even, necessarily, agreed upon; terms in the syllabus and related documents are vague and may be misinterpreted by insensitive teachers. For example, it is suggested that good conversation and speech in general reflects "poise and confidence". These words, partly as a result of their debasement by advertisers, may become confused with glibness. Likewise, the need to "convey thoughts in a convincing manner" may appear to justify a forceful and overbearing approach. One must bear in mind that the majority of teachers entrusted with the assessments have no specialist training or qualification in speech work.

In my country, adolescent boys seem often to acquire a particular type of reticence which I have not observed among their counterparts in England, and which from what I have read is not true of American pupils. Although there is no empirical evidence, the reticence probably springs from a somewhat authoritarian trend in teacher-pupil relationships and a stress on particular images of masculinity which sometimes tend to suggest that efforts at effective speech are "soft" or "wet". The situation is not to be confused with the "stiff upper lip" (and even stiffer lower jawed) reticence of the stereotype Englishman; ours is, I think, the result of a kind of submissiveness which tends to discourage rhetoric or display. Because of this, and the problem may find expression though in other forms in other countries, it seems that greater stress needs to be laid on group talk and group assessment of it, thus playing down the focus on the individual. There are, of course, many ways in which a group may prepare a programme of speech work for assessment, or engage (perhaps as a whole class) in conversation or brainstorming.

Among many persons, even those in positions of great authority, there has been a marked lack of knowledge about what kinds of activity speech education includes. For too long (and I speak generally now, not only with regard to my own country), good speech has been confused with elocution, and the learning "by heart" (though the heart had little to do with it!) of prose and poetry.

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Whereas a training in elocution is no longer appropriate, certain standards of correctness still prevail for acceptability, especially in a multi-lingual society. This is not merely a matter of "preserving decent standards", but of preventing ambiguity or grossness. However we define "good speech", we presumably have in mind certain criteria of judgment; Brock (1973) says that the two most important qualities are clear enunciation and successful communication of meaning, but he stresses that many varieties of good speech exist.

Current interest in the study of speech register has drawn attention to "appropriacy" as a criterion for effective speech, and while the old controls of what one may say to whom, and how, have relaxed, speech is still defined by a social context. For the classroom, Ann Mitchell (1973) advocates a "consultative" style involving continuous participation, and Fowler stresses that the class should provide "a forum for ideas rather than a showcase for performance". These and similar views suggest the importance of spontaneity, and imply that for assessment, the willingness of a candidate to state and defend a point of view is as important as what he states or what manner he adopts.

Christabel Burniston, of the English Speaking Board, stresses that apart from effective preparation and arrangement of material, good speech is marked by audience contact and involvement, and by personal enthusiasm on the part of the speaker. Wilkinson feels that overall, it is the ability to express thoughts and communicate these to others which signifies successful oracy. He distinguishes between a "formal speech situation", such as a sermon, and a "reciprocal" one, involving audience participation. Different criteria, clearly, would be needed in the assessment of each kind of situation.

McAllister warns against a speaker striking a pose or attempting to "look bright and animated". While superimposed gestures or artificial rhythms are disconcerting, it is however of interest to recall that successful politicians and other salesmen, particularly on television, often depend on the visual impressions which they make through their movement and even their dress.

In any ultimate analysis of the qualities of good speech, the words of the gentlemen of the Port Royal, in a document dated 1696, come to mind. On 'The Art of Speaking' the Gentlemen noted that

> 'We feed with more appetite upon wholsom and relishable Meats: we listen more easily to a Discourse, whose smoothness lessons the trouble of attending.'

It is still, indeed, the extent to which the "trouble of attending" is lessened which marks the success of spoken language! such success depends on the speaker satisfying certain criteria, some of which I shall now review.

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My understanding of oral English leads me to conclude that it exists under six broad areas and that assessment in each of these areas should consider different criteria. The areas are: reading aloud, participation in group discussion, conversation, giving a prepared talk, delivering other prepared work, and impromptu speech. The authorities who have influenced me include P.J. Hitchman, Andrew Wilkinson, Christabel Burniston and Arthur Wise.

In his research, Hitchman found that the most reliable form of assessment was based on separate criteria and, in addition, a general impression mark. This led to assessment of the whole - total effect of speech. Douglas, in 1958, noted that

> 'Nowhere is the Gestalt principle more demonstrable than in speech behaviour: the whole does not equal the sum of the parts.'

Reading aloud is far more complex than most teachers realise. Its success depends on visualisation, which (providing the mechanics of reading per se have been mastered) leads to fluency. Visualisation means real conception of the images involved, leading to suitable choice of pace and expression; fluency means appropriate pacing and breath control. Together, these result in communication, which is ultimately a process of sharing.

The selection of passages for reading aloud is no easy matter. Apart from pace, the capacity to read aloud is impossible to quantify. If the passage is over-prepared and over-rehearsed, the validity of the test is questionable; if an unseen passage is given for reading, the sheer justice of the situation is open to doubt. Perhaps a far better purpose would be served all round, if pupils were able to listen to interesting passages, well read.

In group discussion, some kind of structured interaction is envisaged: either questions are set, or the participants are allocated roles. The chief criterion of success would seem to be participation, which of course does not necessarily mean continuous speech! It does mean the willingness to state a point of view and the ability to defend it if necessary. It also means the ability to link the contributions of others, and to elicit response (other than "noises of approval") from others.

Senior pupils are often adept at assessing one another's worth, and there seems no reason why they should not at least work with the teacher in deciding the value of the contributions made by each member of a discussion or conversation group.

Conversation (unlike discussion, as I have used the term) is relatively unstructured and if it is assessed in addition to or in place of group discussion, it may become what Hitchman has called a "private" test of speech. Delivery is clearly an important criterion, good delivery evincing the capacity to develop or sustain a theme without dogmatism. Vocabulary and language appropriate to the situation and to the group members, avoidance of cliché and sentimentality, and at least some originality in content, leading to a quickening of interest in the listener, would be other marks of successful conversation; but perhaps most significant would be that the candidates should converse and not engage in monologues.

Though I have personal doubts as to the value of conversations, for assessment purposes, arising out of books read by the candidate, I feel that if conversation is to be tested the candidate should have had the advantage of some preparation. Provided a subject has been fixed on in advance, candidates could justifiably be assessed in terms of logical presentation of ideas, anticipation of opposing points of view, or general knowledge of the topic. Without a certain amount of preparation, the conversation test may be accused of being a particular kind of "intelligence test".

The prepared talk is probably the best documented aspect of oral work. Flexibility in the use of voice, adequate descriptive ability, evidence of sound preparation, and logicality in the development of points are the usually cited criteria of judgment. Where I come from, there has recently been considerable discussion on the use of aids and notes. We have all, I am sure, heard (or rather seen) talks in which the "aids" have become the main focus of attention, or where the use of notes has created a barrier between speaker and audience. It seems acceptable to look to a speaker's ability to answer questions from the floor - though assessment of this skill may be even more hazardous than of the talk itself! Perhaps the sheer number of variety of the questions raised could indicate the extent to which the listening group had found the talk stimulating.

The delivery of other prepared work includes the presentation at performance level of poetry or prose, for example as part of a "theme programme". The words may or may not have been memorised. In either case, the principal criteria of success are visualisation and interpretation (indicating, through skilful phrasing, real understanding of the words). Use of voice would qualify as a special criterion here, for though an assessor would not be looking for potential Broadway stars, an ugly or inaudible voice would hardly be suitable.

The preparation and presentation of a "theme programme" or "centre of interest" can be an exciting way to go about the assessment of speech in the secondary school. Pupils work in groups of between three and five, to a time limit of say twenty minutes. Within that limit, they present (among themselves) an introductory statement on the chosen theme, poetry or prose excerpts related to it, a prepared talk on some aspect, and perhaps a short forum discussion. The imaginative teacher, by such means, can effectively disguise the assessment-for-examination-purposes, and lay stress on participation: on process, rather than product. If each pupil took part in three or four theme programmes during the course of a year, all the examination requirements of a normal secondary school oral English component would probably be met.

Finally, in the case of impromptu speech work, the attention in the assessment would be directed to the resourcefulness and flexibility of the candidate. In such exercises as Chain Story Telling or "One Minute Please", a special kind of astuteness is tested - but a sensitive assessor would presumably bear in mind the difference between sheer native intellect and communicative competence. In the case of impromptu speech, it is the ability to respond quickly in articulate form which is being tested.

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Fluency, control of diction, ability to summarise, and ability to exploit an existing or previous situation (all in the tradition of the true debater) would be among the qualities sought for.

The criteria I have suggested (and of course the list is by no means exhaustive; the point is that there should be a list, and that it should be known to the candidates) emphasise the very personal nature of the speech event and of its assessment. Criticism of speech, though well meant, can often be seen by the pupil as personal criticism, and destructive comments may well inhibit a young person. As Wise points out,

> 'The comments we make on a child's speech should be both realistic and useful ... a remark that suggests a prejudiced view of speech on our part can undermine permanently our authority in the speech class.' (as cited 1970, p.20)

Criteria for assessment vary according to circumstances. One would not necessarily use the same standards of judgment among upper-middle class girls as one would use among working-class boys. Audience reactions differ according to class or cultural group, and the ultimate test of success in speech is the ability to obtain and retain the interest of a particular listening group. Assessment, then, is always relative and certainly subjective.

As we can appreciate from the general purposes of our subject, as fairly similarly expressed in modern syllabuses, objective assessment is not only impossible, but an undesirable goal. A Central Committee of the Scottish Education Department, for example, noted that after development of the basic skills of English, the teacher should "provide experiences which will enrich the lives of the pupils and contribute to their personal growth". In my own country, the present core syllabus of the Joint Matriculation Board states that the aim in English is "to promote the pupil's intellectual, emotional and social development".

Since (if you will forgive the awful pun) the blooming of the era of behavioural objectives, stresses on measurable attainment have peppered the educational literature. Eisner, however, is one of those who have questioned this approach. He notes that not all the behaviour which may occur in a classroom is predictable; he also points out that

> 'What is most educationally valuable is the development of that mode of curiosity, inventiveness and insight that is capable of being described only in metaphoric or poetic terms. Indeed, the image of the educated man that has been held in highest esteem for the longest period of time in Western civilisation is one which is not amenable to standard measurement.'

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Just as important as agreement on specific objectives, surely, is knowledge of the purposes behind teaching and subsequent assessment. I suggest that with regard to oral English, the main purpose should be diagnostic rather than for purposes of certification. Important, too, is to ensure that the techniques of assessment perform their recognised educational function - namely, to give an indication of the extent to which objectives have been achieved.

It is clear that as many teachers as possible should be involved in the designing of the assessments, and that these assessments should be an ongoing and continuous part of the system, rather than a once-off experience suggesting that the end of learning has come.

It seems to me that the following are among the points to be borne in mind when planning the assessment of oral work.

1) There is little correlation between the results of formal tests of spoken English and teachers' estimates of oracy. Not only the reliability, then, but also the validity of testing is open to question. However, as Wilkinson noted as long ago as 1965, 'The important thing is that speech work should be going on in schools, and its prestige guaranteed by examination'. (p.97)

2) Because of the extremely wide differences in what teachers believe to be acceptable standards, some kind of external moderation, even by a teacher in a neighbouring school, needs to be provided for.

3) Continuous individual testing of oracy is impossible in the school situation because of the time factor. The use of a language laboratory, or of a "master tape" against which pupils could assess their own efforts, could be profitable.

4) In circumstances where for any reason the status of speech education is low, the assessment procedures may come to assume a threatening role. Before testing, then, it would seem necessary to improve the so-called "speech climate" in the school - for example, through publicising speech activities.

5) It seems wise to play down the element of competition. Providing grades rather than actual marks may be a move in this direction, but it is surely best that if marks must be awarded, these should be a matter between the pupil and his examiner only. Fowler suggests that a diagnostic chart of each pupil's speech ability could be made at the beginning of each year, and his own personal improvement indicated on the chart.

I undertook a survey of teacher attitudes towards the assessment of oral English in my province. It is perhaps of interest to note that 85% of the respondents felt that they were highly influenced, in their assessments, by the eye contact and ease of gesture demonstrated by the candidates; yet hardly ever was specific training provided in these aspects of communication. A quarter of the respondents, too, admitted to being influenced by knowledge of the pupils' capabilities in written work.

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68% admitted to being influenced by pronunciation and accent, though it is generally known that contemporary approaches, in England at least, play down the importance of these elements (witness, for example, the changed definition of 'B.B.C. English'!). Almost sixty per cent of teachers felt themselves to be influenced by the pupils' tone or attitude towards themselves, the assessors. All these points call attention to the need for some kind of check-system and the establishment of defined criteria.

When asked to name the problems or difficulties they encountered in the assessment of speech, the teachers in my sample made mention, inter alia, of the following:

1) The frustration arising from prohibition, by the Principal, of undue 'noise' during lessons;
2) Lack of guidance by the inspectorate;
3) The tendency for overall marks in English to be raised as a result of the inclusion of an oral mark, because it was almost impossible to 'fail' the oral component (this is an unfounded argument as statistical investigation at the public examination level has revealed that, while the spread and level of marks in general have been affected by the inclusion of oral assessments, most candidates have 'benefited' by no more than 1%).;
4) Vagueness about how much attention should be placed on the use of casual language, sometimes referred to as slang, and to local peculiarisms such as 'O.K.', 'man' and the frequently-used 'ja', an Afrikaans word for 'yes';
5) The inability of pupils (even from middle-class homes) to converse 'intelligently' or to prepare original talks because of an unstimulating home environment. (South African 'culture' has been nicely satirised by a radio advertisement which sings the praises of 'Braaivleis, rugby, sunny skies and Chevrolet'.)

It was interesting to find that when asked to mention the qualities they sought in assessing pupils' prepared talks, conversations and reading skills, teachers showed general agreement and acceptance of most of the criteria I have mentioned, although at the time of the survey no specific criteria for assessment had been officially decreed.

In conversation, the teachers looked inter alia for ease of expression, logical argument, animation, outgoing nature, confidence and enthusiasm - all qualities impossible to measure, and mostly suggestive of extraversion. In prepared talks, content seemed all important, followed by ability to hold interest, easy flow of language, and evidence of sound planning. When considering reading aloud, the respondents stressed fluency, correct use of the pause, evidence of comprehension reflected in appropriate stress, and use of suitable intonation and pace.

It seems to me very important that more conscious structuring of assessments is necessary; while one does not wish to be burdened with lengthy schedules, and while one is conscious of inevitable subjectivity, a system is necessary. Perhaps a meeting such as ours could help to formulate a satisfactory 'assessment sheet' - I have provided examples of two such, for possible discussion.

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The criteria appearing on these and similar assessment schedules could of course be replaced by others, which in all probability would be similarly vague - and necessarily so, because the whole matter of speech assessment is so individual and personal. It seems to me quite unacceptable to attempt a quantification of speech quality; sometimes, however, circumstances demand that marks are awarded. Generally, the range of such marks is not the same as those awarded for written work for particular reasons.

In the first place, total failure in every respect seems highly unlikely in any physically and mentally normal pupil who is a candidate for oral assessment. Those with speech defects or states of anxiety so extreme that oral communication is almost impossible, should surely not be subjected to the trauma of such assessment. Secondly, experience seems to indicate that underachieving pupils, or even non-achieving ones (in terms of their written work) may produce spoken language of high quality. This could be a matter of personality, or of motivation, or both. The implication is that adding the marks for oral assessment to the marks for written work may produce unexpected results - a general raising of totals, or a change in the order of merit for example. These are problems which need to be solved within individual schools or departments of education, and a solution may be that because the skills being tested are so different in oral work from what they are in written work, the marks should not be combined at all.

In attempting to move towards more 'standardization' or objectivity, there have been experiments in some parts of the world which have involved tape recorders. While a tape recording may perhaps be useful in terms of demonstrating or even establishing criteria for assessment, I would suggest that adopting a policy of assessment of recordings per se would be very dangerous. It could lead to a completely altered view of the speech act, tending for example to play down the importance of audience response. In seeking to eliminate subjectivity by cutting out visual impressions, it would reduce speech to a cold impersonal sound. We have only to listen to the sound-track of a film to realise how much communication really depends on visible movement; and we know that play-scripts for radio broadcast embrace specific aspects and techniques.

I have tried to draw attention to some of the factors and problems relating to the assessment of oral English within the context of the normal high school situation. In the primary school, of course, assessment would not play so dominant a role and many of the problems would simply not arise. There are various other kinds of assessments, as for example provided by the English Speaking Board, used mainly for certification. These are voluntary assessments, and the candidates entering for them are normally fully aware of the conditions. They may, for example, be fully prepared to endure the risks of competition. But I have been concerned with the pupil in school, who has no choice in the matter and for whom testing forms part of the normal course of events.

What points, then, may be made in summary and conclusion?

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The need for testing not to control teaching has been hinted at several times. Christabel Burniston has warned that the worst time to introduce a spoken English test is in the final years of the secondary school, when the adolescent may be extremely self-conscious. The implications are clear for curriculum development: courses in communication need to be designed, and the attention of pupils, teachers, parents and all others involved in education needs to be directed to awareness of the importance of speech throughout the school.

Many teachers, it seems, need education in the possibilities which exist for creative speech exercises. Plenty of books are available and, in some parts of the world, comprehensive in-service courses are held. Pressure for these needs to be exerted, so that as many persons as possible become aware of how best to use the available time: not in preparing only for a particular kind of assessment, but in engaging in activities which contribute to the personal development of the pupil so that he will be able to cope with the assessment.

Continuous assessment, according to established criteria, is obviously important. Such criteria should be the subject of regular discussion and evaluation.

Finally, research needs to be undertaken: research into the kinds of methods used by teachers in assessing pupils' speech, the design of listening comprehension tests along the lines of those formulated by Wilkinson (for listening is clearly important as an aspect of total communication), and research into speech patterns and dialects as these exist in particular areas. This kind of research goes on, but often tends to be diffuse and of isolated interest.

Though most of us probably see English as an integrated whole, it does seem that the oral component is worthy of some special consideration, particularly with regard to assessment. Speech is the tool of thought, and however popularised the ideas of Marshall McLuhan become, the medium can never replace the message. The wisdom of the Commedia dell'Arte remains:

> "Praise no man before you hear him speak;
> For speech is the trial of men."